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# The visual figures in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, *The Age of Innocence* and *Ethan Frome*

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Kandidat: Petra Gerić

Mentor: dr. sc. Tatjana Jukić Gregurić

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# 1. Introduction

This diploma paper focuses on the visual figures in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, *The Age of Innocence* and *Ethan Frome*. Visual figures − imagery, symbolism and vision – are the key to fully grasping the meaning of each of these three works. The narratives in these novels are structured around the way the main characters view themselves and the world around them; as Spengler puts it: "vision and the visual (have a role) in the formation of identity and in the subject's way of relating to the world." (Spengler, p 5) More importantly the narratives are structured around the irony generated by the gap between the characters' vision of the world – and themselves − and the reality around them.

## 1.1. The role of art, vision and the visual in Edith Wharton's fiction

Visual arts, vision and the visual play an important role in Edith Wharton's fiction. As Miller notes, Wharton's "affinity for the visual (was) an integral part of her development;" (14) and her "visual sensibility" is apparent in her fiction. Wharton herself commented on the meaning the notion of "vision" carried for her: "I always saw the visible world as a series of pictures, more or less harmoniously composed;" (qtd. in Wolf, p 26) she also mentions her "affinity for visibly appealing art" (Miller, p 13) in her autobiography *A Backward Glance*: "My visual sensibility must always have been too keen for middling pleasures (…).'" (qtd. in Miller, p 13) Wharton's "visual sensibility," as she herself calls it, is very much apparent in her "interest in fashion, decoration, architecture, and art." (Hoeller, p 133) It is worth mentioning that her first published book was a book on interior design, *The Decoration of Houses*. Likewise, her fiction is filled with "meticulous descriptions of clothes, houses, and exhibitions;" (Hoeller, p 133) and more importantly references to specific works of art.

Orlando points out Wharton's extensive knowledge of art and art history; she refers to Wharton as "a self taught art historian" (7) – Wharton was after all "never formally trained."(7) Orlando emphasizes Wharton's references to specific works of art in her fiction – particularly the use of ekphrasis, "the practice of invoking actual works of art in literature", (7) in her works - and the need to take these works of art into account when analyzing Wharton's fiction: the "allusions to authentic works of art (…) are central to understanding (Wharton's) project." (6-7) Miller makes a comparison between Wharton's works of fiction

to *tableaux vivant*, an art form that combines visual arts and acting: “Her art aspires to the condition of a *tableaux vivant* – visually expressive as well as alive.” (Miller, p 21)

## 2. Visual figures in *The House of Mirth*

### 2.1. The turn of the Century New York society – a society undergoing a tremendous cultural change

*The House of Mirth,* published in 1905, is Edith Wharton’s second published fictional work. The novel marks, as Carol Singley puts it in *Edith Wharton’s The House of Mirth*, “Wharton’s coming of age as a novelist, (…) (and) remains (…) a testament to her powers as a great American writer of realism and naturalism.” (3) The novel made her very popular among the readers and brought her critical acclaim. Like many other Wharton’s fictional works *The House of Mirth* focuses on the upper-class society in which she was born. The major issues she addresses in the novel centre on the social changes that society was going through at the time.

Wharton was close friends with Henry James whom she looked up to as a mentor. Wharton’s works are often compared to James’. (49) Both authors share – among other things – the same attitude towards progress and change that the 20th century brings. Wharton’s fiction “interrogates the idea of the ‘progressive’ age.” (Orlando, p 197) Wharton and James viewed progress with skepticism (Singley, p 57) which is apparent in *The House of Mirth*.

The story of *The House of Mirth* is set in the upper-class society of New York at the turn of the century. Wharton belonged to this very class and observed, from within, the American society as it was undergoing a “tremendous cultural change.” (Singley, *Edith Wharton’s The House of Mirth,* 4) New technologies, industrial progress and the growing obsession with money made a great impact on the society’s value system at the time. (4) The novel portrays a “relentlessly materialistic and self-serving” (3) society, a society that “requires women to marry for money, rendering them little more than decorative objects.” (4)

Kress Karn points out that “Wharton, as a social critic, was intensely aware of the predicament of women in a culture that puts them on exhibit.” (138) When explaining the 19th century sexual politics and the way “women are put on a 'pedestal'” (Spengler, p 7) both Spengler and Orlando turn to Laura Mulvey, a feminist film theorist, who coined the term

"to-be-looked-at-ness". Mulvey highlights the cultural mechanism present in the 19th century, a mechanism by which "men are the makers of meaning while women are the bearers thereof, being reduced to the status of 'to-be-looked-at-ness' by a male gaze that is invested with social power and cultural authority." (Mulvey qtd. in Spengler, p 7) Women are "turned (…) into objects of display, to be looked at and gazed at and stared at by men." (Mulvey qtd. in Orlando, p 18) As objects they are seemingly bereft of any power, however, Orlando points out that these women are able "to manipulate the culture of display in order to locate power in their bodies, particularly the art they produce with their bodies." (26) Art became a medium for women to express *their* beauty.

Wharton's views on 19th century sexual politics come to light in *The House of Mirth*, especially in the character of Lily Bart, a woman who presents "the epitome of America's ideal of the woman as an 'exquisite object'." (Wolf, p 27)

### 2.2. Lily Bart as the focalizing consciousness

Lily Bart as the main character and the focalizing consciousness in the novel is inextricably trapped in the discourses that define women at the time. In the novel, she is presented "through an ironic and somewhat unsympathetic narrator, or through Lawrence Selden, who sees only an amusing, beautiful object or a shrewd husband-hunter." (Singley, p 76) The unsentimental tone of the narrator and Selden's gaze provide a certain distance towards Lily as a character. Throughout the novel the narrator mediates Lily's thoughts and emotions, but for the most part the reader gathers information about her by means of gossip which she is constantly surrounded by. As for Lawrence Selden, although he appears somewhat more sympathetic than the other characters in the novel, he views Lily practically the same way other male characters in the novel do – as a beautiful object, something they desire and want to possess.

Lily is the focal point of these discourses to the extent that it is almost impossible to define what her "true self" is; or whether her "true self" even exists. As her first name suggests, she is "like some rare flower grown for exhibition." (*The House of Mirth*, p 336) And as her surname suggests, she is a beautiful object, like a painting that is meant to be bartered for by men. Orlando points out that "Wharton makes it clear that Lily had been fashioned to adorn and to delight" (301) and, "as she knows well, she is destined to barter her beauty on

the marriage market." (59) Her beauty is a commodity to be sold to the highest bidder. As Wolf puts it, *The House of Mirth* "was a work designed to explore one pernicious notion of 'vision' – namely, the tendency to encourage women to become no more than ornaments, collectible items in a newly affluent world of successful business men." (27)

Lily was fashioned in such a way as to provide aesthetic pleasure; (142) she is unable to perceive herself as anything else. The world of luxury is the setting in which she was most comfortable; it provided "the background she required, the only climate she could breathe in." (*The House of Mirth*, p 25) Whenever she imagined what kind of life she would lead, its setting was always in a drawing room.

> There were moments when she longed blindly for anything different, anything strange, remote and untried; but the utmost reach of her imagination did not go beyond picturing her usual life in a new setting. She could not figure herself as anywhere but in a drawing-room, diffusing elegance as a flower sheds perfume. (*The House of Mirth*, p 104)

"The brilliant destiny" (*The House of Mirth*, p 91) she envisions throughout the novel, the one she felt "fit (…) to attract" (*The House of Mirth*, p 91) with her beauty, was precisely that: to be an ornament fitted in perfect surroundings; a "flower (that) sheds perfume" (*The House of Mirth*, p 104) in the drawing room. She cannot fathom any other kind of life; she is, as Fryer puts it, a "picturesque woman (…), a decoration." (Fryer, p 154)

### 2.3. The *tableaux vivant* scene: Lily as a masterpiece of art

Kress Karn writes of Lily Bart as a beautiful object, "linked to art." (142) The way Lily functions as a masterpiece of art is best exemplified by the *tableaux vivant* scene in *The House of Mirth*. This is one of the crucial scenes in the novel; it "offers insight into (the main) characters, paints a memorable portrait of New York society of the period, and helps to define Wharton's aesthetic." (Miller, p 11)

*Tableaux vivant* is a specific art form, the term literally translating as "living picture." Miller defines it as "a unique art form that combines painting, a purely visual art, and acting, an art that fuses visual and verbal elements." (11) Its emphasis is on the visual; actors transform themselves into works of art. In the *tableaux vivant* scene Lily, along with many other women, literally becomes a painting.

In the *tableaux vivant* scene ekphrasis is used, and paintings by various artists, such as Goya, Van Dyck, and Sir Joshua Reynolds are represented. Lily chooses to become a living picture of *Mrs. Lloyd,* a portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds. She then, as Orlando puts it, oversees the process of her own objectification and in so doing uses "art to (her) own advantage." (56) Her own artistic sensibility and "vivid plastic sense" (*The House of Mirth*, p 138) become apparent through her involvement in the artistic process.

Lily's living picture stands out from all the others, relying on "unassisted beauty." (*The House of Mirth*, p 141) The other tableaux, for example Mrs. Van Alstyne as a Van Dyck and Carry Fisher as a Goya, are fitted with various accessories and embellishments, making them "far less liberating and empowering than Lily's 'Mrs. Lloyd'." (Orlando, p 81) Lily's picture on the other hand has no accessories or embellishment. She wears a simple dress that follows the outline of her body; and her posture is relaxed. Moreover, Lily's picture centers on her own beauty. She "does not need decoration; she is decoration;" (Herndl qtd. by Orlando, p 83) and she purposefully wants "(her viewers) to know how good she looked." (Orlando, p 70) In taking "control (over) what others see" (Orlando, p 70) she gains a certain amount of power. When her living picture is presented, Lily experiences a sense of triumph and "an intoxicating sense of (…) power." (*The House of Mirth*, p 143)

> Lily Bart locates power in turning herself into art, particularly in the tableaux scene (…). Nowhere in the novel is Lily more powerful than when she poses as Sir Joshua Reynolds's 'Mrs. Lloyd' and thereby oversees her own objectification. In that sense, Lily has control over the imaging of her body: her body becomes her art. (Orlando, p 56)

Apart from achieving a certain amount of power, Lily also manages to reach a certain level of transcendence when posing in her living picture. Reynolds' painting of *Mrs. Lloyd* becomes the "portrait of Lily Bart." (*The House of Mirth*, p 141) As Singley and Orlando both point out, Reynolds' painting features Mrs. Joanna Lloyd in the act of writing, of "lovingly carving her husband's initials on a tree." (Singley, p 81) The painting shows a beautiful woman expressing her love and devotion for her husband. In selecting this particular painting Lily "had shown her artistic intelligence;" she has chosen "a type so like her own that she could embody the person represented without ceasing to be herself." (*The House of Mirth*, p 141) In so doing "Lily (remains) fully alive in her living picture." (Orlando, p 72)

In the *tableaux vivant* scene Lily manages to catch "for a moment a note of that eternal harmony of which her beauty was a part." (*The House of Mirth*, p 141) Singley notes that Lily's triumph in the *tableaux vivant* scene is due to her transforming "pageantry into something rare and inspired;" her living picture doesn't just show off her own beauty, but "(reveals) her true essence;" for a short time she becomes an "exemplar of beauty and love." (81) That is the only moment in the book when Lily is able to rise above the mundane completely. In that moment, it was "as though her beauty (was) detached from all that cheapened and vulgarized it." (*The House of Mirth*, p 142) She is, however, unable, as Miller points out, to maintain this condition.

Throughout the rest of the novel Lily is unable to extricate herself from the "the trivialities of her little world." (The House of Mirth, p 141)

> When Lily (…) is under the influence of a profound sense of visual beauty, she is able to transcend the mundane. Her flaw is that she cannot maintain this condition, and she eventually becomes tragically rooted to the worst aspects of society - its gossip and palaver, and its lack of appreciation for true beauty. (Miller, p 13)

The society depicted in the novel expects an attractive woman to barter "her body (…) to the end of securing a means for living" (Orlando, p 11) i.e. a husband. This is something Lily refuses to do throughout the novel. She is the masterpiece of art that refuses to sell herself to just any bidder – which ultimately causes her downfall. "Lily Bart does not (survive) because (she is unwilling), in the final hour, to compromise (her) virtue, (her) body, (her) beauty, or even (her) freedom, all in the name of survival." (Orlando, p 59) She consistently relinquishes all the possibilities offered her.

Lawrence Selden, as much as he may seem as the one person who might be able to understand her, "exposes himself as an untrustworthy reader and thus proves ill equipped to see the full 'picture' of Lily Bart." (Orlando, p 73) His actions in the novel betray just how wrong his view of her is: he's never there when she needs him and he is always inclined to think the worst of her. The idea that Selden is the one who sees "the real Lily Bart" (*The House of Mirth*, p 141) therefore "carries (in itself a) double edged irony." (Fryer, p 162)

> While the reader may wish to credit Selden for his ability to penetrate the vision of Lily's tableau and see there 'the whole tragedy of her life,' his awareness does not pardon him for failing to come to

> Lily's aid in her most critical hours. In fact, considering his gift of insight into her predicament, his failure to act on her behalf is all the more indefensible. (Orlando, p 74)

## 2.4. Symbolism of rubbish and waste in *The House of Mirth*

As already mentioned, Lily achieves a level of transcendence in the *tableaux vivant* scene, but she is unable to maintain that condition. Her greatest enemy is time. It is important to mention that Wharton's working title for *The House of Mirth* was *A Moment's Ornament*. (Orlando, p 76) This stresses Lily's ornamental function on the one hand; but it also points out the fact that Lily's beauty is transient. As the novel progresses Lily's beauty fades; aware that her only capital is her beauty she is in constant fear of growing old and losing it. This is also connected to her fear of the "dingy" and "ugly" – Jones comments that Wharton herself "(…) was always vaguely frightened by ugliness." (Wharton qtd. in Jones, p 2) Singley also stresses that: "words like 'dingy' and 'dreary' refer not only to superficial material conditions but to an entire quality of life." (73)

In the first part of the novel Lily is compared to a rare flower and a beautiful painting, in the second half of the novel – as her condition in life grows ever worse − the imagery surrounding her changes. Wharton uses the imagery of rubbish and waste to emphasize Lily's condition at the end of the novel. In her last conversation with Selden Lily explains her situation by comparing herself to "a screw or a cog in the machine", one that could not find a place to fit in – not in the world of high society. Lily was brought up in such a way that she "only fits into one hole;" she can have absolutely no other use except the one she was fashioned for. She is a "flower from which every bud had been nipped except the crowning blossom of her beauty." (*The House of Mirth*, p 336)

Lily, as a "rare flower," can have no practical purpose. She is "the victim of the civilization which had produced her that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate." (*The House of Mirth,* p 6) As Singley notices: "(Lily) is 'exquisite', expensive, and amusing - made from fine material 'that circumstance had fashioned . . . into a futile shape.'" (80) By failing to find her place in high society, she becomes unable to find any work or provide for herself. "(…) as a bread-winner she could never compete with professional ability. Since she had been brought up to be ornamental, she could hardly blame herself for failing to serve any practical purpose." (*The House of Mirth*, p 315)

At the end of the novel Lily fits nowhere; she is headed for "the rubbish heap." (*The House of Mirth*, p 327) She describes herself as "rootless and ephemeral," a "spindrift," or "uprooted growth." (*The House of Mirth*, p 338) She becomes a disposable object − a product of a "cultivated leisure class (…) that was fast becoming obsolete." (Kinman, p 109) Having failed to do what is expected of her and put a price tag on her beauty and determine her own worth in monetary terms, she ends up worthless.

### 2.5. Lily as a "beautiful corpse"

At the end of the novel, having lost all purpose and hope, Lily dies from an overdose of chloral. As Orlando points out Lily "ultimately, (…) becomes a beautiful corpse." (56) Even in death, she is depicted as beautiful and aesthetically pleasing. Moreover, her death scene invokes many works of art depicting "aesthetically beautiful deaths." (75) Orlando makes a connection between Lily Bart's death and the way the Pre-Raphaelite painters depicted women:

> The novel's closing scene captures Selden at the deathbed of his (would be) beloved, and Wharton's use of this trope allows her to critique a tradition, manifest in the work of Rossetti and his Pre-Raphaelite brothers, that positions dead beautiful women as subject to the gazes of men who fail to rise to their occasion. Visual images of this sort freeze an aesthetically appealing woman into a posture that is disempowering, passive, and forever to-be-looked-at while immortalizing the male in the active position as gazing consumer. (74)

By means of Lily's death scene, Orlando argues, Wharton critiques the tradition of women being "permanently (enshrined) (…) as an eroticized beautiful corpse laid out for our visual consumption." (76) Lily as a beautiful corpse is put on a pedestal there to be looked at; while Lawrence Selden assumes the position of the male gaze. Moreover, Selden functions as a "belated worshipper" (75) – a term Dante Gabriel Rossetti uses in *The House of Life.* Throughout the novel Selden fails Lily at every turn; he constantly misreads her and fails to come to her aid. In the very end, he actually realizes just how much he loves her, but not until it's too late.

To further emphasize the connection between Lily's death scene and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Orlando makes a direct connection between Lily Bart and Dante Gabriel Rossetti's muse Elisabeth Siddall. (75) Both Lily and Elisabeth Siddall died young "after a

gradual physical decline;" (75) both developed a drug dependency (laudanum or chloral); and they both died from an overdose. Each of them was turned into a masterpiece of art. Elisabeth Siddall was best known for posing as Millais's *Ophelia* – a portrait of an "aesthetically beautiful death;" (75) just as Lily is presented in her death scene: as beautiful and aesthetically pleasing.

### 2.6. Wharton's use of color and imagery in portraying the turn-of-the-century society

Wharton uses different colors and imagery in portraying the different circles of society that Lily comes across throughout the novel.

The inner circle of high society is the world of the Trenors. Bellomont, their country house, elegantly decorated, spacious and full of light, carries about it an air "of a studied luxury." (*The House of Mirth*, p 40) In contrast to this milieu, the "Gormer milieu" − the "social outskirts which (she) always fastidiously avoided." (*The House of Mirth*, p 246) − is a place where "everything was pitched in a higher key" (*The House of Mirth*, p 246). She notices that there is "more of each thing: more noise, more color, more champagne, more familiarity." (*The House of Mirth*, p 246) The Gormer milieu is presented in somewhat ambivalent terms: on the one hand it is more colorful, noisy and most of all filled with more familiarity, more good nature, and less rivalry, than the world Lily used to live in; however, it is very vividly described as "a flamboyant copy of her own (Lily's) world" (*The House of Mirth*, p 246). She also describes it as "a caricature approximating the real thing (the centre of society) as the 'society play' approaches the manners of the drawing-room". (*The House of Mirth,* p 246) While there, Lily feels like "an expensive toy in the hands of a spoiled child," (*The House of Mirth*, p 254) which means that the people in this circle of society fail to appreciate her for what she is.

Further away from the centre, on the very fringes of society, Lily comes across the "pink world" of Norma Hatch. While in this circle of society Lily has "an odd sense of being behind the social tapestry, on the side where the threads were knotted and the loose ends hung." (*The House of Mirth*, p 291) Norma Hatch is a representative of the new moneyed class; she is a social climber on her way to invade the high society. She is "rich, helpless, unplaced," (*The House of Mirth*, p 289) a loose end not yet fitted into the tapestry. In this way both Norma Hatch and Rosedale represent the change which the turn-of-the-century society is

undergoing. Norma Hatch's very name and the "pinkness" of her world suggest the new; she is a fledgling who has just "hatched." (*The House of Mirth*, p 290) Hers is "a germinating social life." (*The House of Mirth*, p 290) Nearly everything about Norma Hatch's world suggests the new; new technologies, modernity and the change that the 20th century brings.

> (…) Lily found her (Mrs. Hatch) seated in a blaze of electric light, impartially projected from various ornamental excrescences on a vast concavity of pink damask and gilding, from which she rose like Venus from a shell. (*The House of Mirth*, p 289)

The comparison of Mrs. Hatch with Venus, the goddess of love, puts her fate on a collision course with Lily's. Mrs. Hatch is the *new* masterpiece, while Lily's beauty is beginning to fade. Mrs. Hatch's beauty had a "fixity of something impaled and shown under glass" (*The House of Mirth*, p 289) suggesting on the one hand that she does not yet have to concern herself with the idea of time or her beauty fading. It is also vaguely reminiscent of a beautiful, colorful, exotic insect, impaled and put on display; which suggests that Mrs. Hatch's beauty is also put on a pedestal; there to be looked at. In a way Mrs. Hatch is an exotic, flamboyant version of Lily.

Mrs. Hatch's apartment is full of extravagant details and accessories; it is illuminated in a "blaze of electric light." (*The House of Mirth*, p 289) Despite this "blaze of light" Mrs. Hatch's world is described as "more dimly-lit" than the world of the Gormers'. This is a way for Wharton to express her skepticism towards progress.

The last household Lily visits in the novel is Nettie Struther's house. It is a household living on the very edge of poverty. It stands apart from all the others in the novel. It is described as being "on the grim edge of poverty, (…) but it had the frail audacious permanence of a bird's nest built on the edge of a cliff—a mere wisp of leaves and straw, yet so put together that the lives entrusted to it may hang safely over the abyss." (*The House of Mirth*, p 339) As Jones notes "(Wharton) used domestic spaces both mimetically to identify characters and symbolically to reveal personality traits, (…)." (4) Nettie's household is built on love and understanding which is what gives it an air of "audacious permanence." More importantly, even though it is a poor household, it is neither "dingy" nor "ugly;" Nettie's kitchen is described in terms of its charm and cleanliness; it offers warmth and is far more inviting than any of the houses Lily has encountered so far. It is there that Lily gets "her first glimpse of

the continuity of life;" (*The House of Mirth*, p 339), a glimpse of warmth and love, something she found sorely lacking in all the other households she came across, where people were "like atoms whirling away from each other in some wild centrifugal dance." (*The House of Mirth*, p 339)

Lily never truly belongs in any of the places where she stays. One misstep at a time she goes down the social ladder, and the houses and spaces she inhabits become ever shabbier.

The last space Lily inhabits in the novel is the street – an open, empty and cold space. Having found no place in society she is practically homeless. The reader sees Lily exhausted from walking, sitting on a bench "in the glare of an electric street-lamp." (*The House of Mirth*, p 330) In this light she sees figures "looming black in the white circle of electric light." (*The House of Mirth*, p 330) The electric light is described as unnatural, giving a distorted and frightening image of a world to come.

### 2.7. Images of transportation in *The House of Mirth*

Throughout the novel Lily is constantly on the move, always in search of a place where she might belong and finally ending up on the streets, homeless. The "imagery of transportation," (74) as Singley calls it, plays an important role; it acts as a metaphor for Lily's journey. Singley argues that "(…) Wharton uses imagery of transportation to describe Lily's expected course and its alternative." (74) The imagery and symbolism of transportation along with the spaces Lily encounters are used to emphasize her homelessness.

The first time the reader encounters Lily, seen through Selden's eyes, is at a train station; where she chooses to miss an earlier train to Bellomont. Selden remarks to himself that he "had come on her *in the act of transition* between one and another of the country houses (…)." (*The House of Mirth*, p 1) She stands still and lets the people in the crowd "drift by her." (*The House of Mirth*, p 1) They have places to be, places where they belong, whereas she herself does not.

While in the circle of high society Lily is driven in carriages, and goes on pleasure cruises. Her life at this point is compared to "a long road without dip or turning," (*The House of Mirth*, p 57) and she was to "roll over it in a carriage instead of trudging on foot." (*The House of Mirth*, p 57) Therefore, her expulsion from high society comes as a more of a surprise for

her. She is publicly turned away from a yacht by Bertha Dorset, immediately after having been described by Selden as “poised on the brink of a chasm.” (*The House of Mirth*, p 201)

As the novel progresses the “long road without dip or turning” is described as being less comfortable than at first anticipated. At one point Lily compares her situation to riding in a shaky vehicle:

> There had been moments when the situation had presented itself under a homelier yet more vivid image—that of a shaky vehicle, dashed by unbroken steeds over a bumping road, while she cowered within, aware that the harness wanted mending, and wondering what would give way first. (*The House of Mirth*, p 213)

The vehicles, trains and other transportation devices have the same function as the electric illumination. They symbolize modernity and change, but this change has a negative note to it: Lily cowers within the shaky vehicle that is about to fall apart. Moreover, as Singley points out, Lily rides less and less as the novel progresses. By the end of the novel she is on foot – something that emphasizes her degraded social position: “Wharton continues to emphasize Lily's pedestrian activities, coupling them with her decreasing social and economic position.” (76) There are no more carriages to drive her; she is on the street; a street which is also in a sorry state – something that reflects her situation in life at the very end: “(…) and she hated every step of the walk (…), through the *degradation* of a New York street in the last stages of *decline* from fashion to commerce.” (*The House of Mirth*, p 304, emphasis mine)

The symbolism of transportation vehicles, especially carriages, is particularly poignant at the end of the novel. Lily watches different carriages pass during her walks. Each of the carriages is representative of each circle of society she has come across: Mrs. Van Osburgh is in her “C-spring barouche,” all luxury and elegance; Mrs. Hatch rides in her “*electric* Victoria;” and Judy Trenor is going for “a dip into ‘the street.’” (*The House of Mirth*, p 314) These carriages present, on one hand, “fleeting glimpses of her past;” (*The House of Mirth*, p 314) each of them marks a course Lily’s life could have taken; on the other hand, they serve to remind Lily that she herself has no place and nowhere to go. They emphasize her homelessness, her “sense of aimlessness” (*The House of Mirth*, p 314) and lack of purpose in life.

## 3. Visual figures in *The Age of Innocence*

### 3.1. The old New York society: the society of frozen ritual, a hieroglyphic world

In contrast to *The House of Mirth* which portrays the New York society at the beginning of the 20th century, a society undergoing a "tremendous cultural change," (Singley, *Edith Wharton's The House of Mirth,* 4) *The Age of Innocence*, published in 1920, portrays the old New York society of the 1870s – a time when these changes were only starting to take place. As Singley points out in *Matters of Mind and Spirit*, the old New York society of the 1870s is a society "under siege by new moneyed classes." (166) Wharton portrays this society – a society in decline − as a "threatened tribe (which responds) to this crisis (by drawing) the circle tighter, becoming more exclusive and ritualized." (166)

Many visual images and ekphrasis are used to describe this particular society. Among the most important are images of ritual, most of which invoke images of tribal customs. Fryer describes the society Newland Archer, the main protagonist, lives in as "a female society - but a female society in decline, with frozen rituals." (159) The centre of this female society is Grandmother Mingott, nicknamed Catherine the Great – once very active and vital, but now old and fat to the extent that she's barely able to walk. "The immense accretion of flesh" which she accumulated is compared to "a flood of lava on a doomed city." (*The Age of Innocence*, p 25)

Wharton uses images of caverns and painted tombs to invoke the tribal and female nature of that society. For instance, at one point in the novel, Newland is reminded of a story he had read, "(…) of some peasant children in Tuscany lighting a bunch of straw in a wayside cavern, and revealing old silent images in their painted tomb (…)." (*The Age of Innocence*, p 216) Also, as Singley points out, he "thinks of his own engagement (to May Welland) as a ritual of 'Primitive Man'." (174)

> In reality they all lived in a kind of hieroglyphic world, where the real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs; as when Mrs. Welland who knew exactly why Archer had pressed her to announce her daughter's engagement at the Beaufort ball and had indeed expected him to do no less), yet felt obliged to simulate reluctance, and the air of having had her hand forced, quite as, in the books on Primitive Men (…) the savage bride is dragged with shrieks from her parents' tent. (*The Age of Innocence*, p 42)

This image implies, as Singley explains, that the "old New York society merely approximates or imitates reality, and Archer – to the extent that he adheres to its values – is an enlightened caveman." (175) The world of old New York society is a "hieroglyphic world where *the real thing* was never said or done or even thought, (…)." (*The Age of Innocence*, p 42 emphasis mine) In order be able to understand that world, one must be a deft reader; one must be able to read and interpret these sings correctly. Archer's world is a world of ritual, completely artificial. Miller points out that one of the most important thematic conflicts of *The Age of Innocence* is "the genuine versus the artificial." (20) Newland Archer's world is a genteel world, a world which aims to avoid anything unpleasant. Archer himself remarks that it is "better (to) keep on the surface, in the prudent old New York way." (*The Age of Innocence*, p 110)

The goal of this world is "the preservation of its artificial reality." (Singley, p 174) Many portraits are constantly mentioned in connection to the old New York society; and many ekphrasis are used to visualize its members. The portraits invoke the idea of people being frozen, preserved in an artificial reality, "as bodies caught in glaciers (that) keep for years a rosy life-in-death." (*The Age of Innocence*, p 50) For instance, the house where Newland lives with his mother and sister at the beginning of the novel is filled with portraits of "Archers, Newlands and van der Luydens hanging in the dark frames on the dark walls." (*The Age of Innocence*, p 36) Newland's mother and sister are themselves described as "'true Newlands; tall, pale, and slightly round-shouldered, with long noses, sweet smiles and a kind of drooping distinction like that in certain faded Reynolds' portraits." (*The Age of Innocence*, p 50)

Louisa van der Luyden is also described as being preserved in her portrait as if she were frozen in ice; Newland remarks that she had been "gruesomely preserved in the airless atmosphere of a perfectly irreproachable existence." (*The Age of Innocence,* p 50) "The airless atmosphere" suggests that her personality was in some way suffocated by the society that she lives in. The tribal society of old New York is a world where "the individual (…) is nearly always sacrificed to what is supposed to be the collective interest;" (*The Age of Innocence*, p 110) something suggested by the fact that she is "*gruesomely* preserved". Her "perfectly irreproachable existence" also seems to suggest that she is artificial; she never thinks to move outside the outlines of the portraits' frame. Louisa van der Luyden is

“enshrined” in her portrait and she is described by Newland as virtually dead. A “(body) caught in (a glacier that keeps) for years a rosy life-in-death.” (*The Age of Innocence*, p 50)

The old New York society is also compared to a “small and slippery pyramid, in which, as yet, hardly a fissure had been made or a foothold gained;” (*The Age of Innocence*, p 46) meaning that the society of old New York was very conservative and exclusive, and as already mentioned, very close knit and skeptical toward anything strange or unusual. For instance, Ellen Olenska, who comes from Europe and wishes to divorce her husband, is at first shunned by the old New York society. She would never have been accepted, if the van der Luydens hadn’t intervened. Their intervention, however, wasn’t motivated as much by “the quality of justice (as by) the tradition of ‘family’.” (Singley, p 174)

### 3.2. Newland Archer’s “misguided gaze”

The society of old New York, the world of Newland Archer, is the world as seen and perceived by Newland Archer himself. As William E. Cain puts it: “(Wharton) presents the action in the third person but limits it to Newland Archer's point of view: we see characters and situations from his perspective and perceive Newland's and others' thoughts and feelings as he experiences them (…).” (Cain, p 95) The reader experiences the story through Archer’s eyes.

In many ways Archer perceives himself as better and more well-read than those around him; he “felt himself distinctly the superior of these chosen specimens of old New York gentility; he had probably read more, thought more, and even seen a good deal more of the world, than any other man of the number.” (*The Age of Innocence*, p 6) It is Archer’s belief that he is able to see through these members of his society, that his being “more read and experienced” makes him see the world more clearly. He believes he is able to read and see through the “hieroglyphic world” around him. As Kress Karn points out, “Wharton uses the items in Archer’s library and the paintings he has viewed –and more importantly the way he views them - in order to show” (142) the way in which Archer makes sense of the world around him and interpret the “hieroglyphic world” he lives in. The books and paintings offer him, as Orlando points out “a fantasy world – a glimpse at ‘the beautiful things that could not possibly happen in real life.’” (173-174) This fantasy world becomes Archer’s “sanctuary”, a place for “his secret thoughts and longings.” (*The Age of Innocence*, p 265) He

is “locked inside (the world of) fantasy of painting and poetry” (Kress Karn, p 142) In other words, Newland Archer is a dreamer; he is “predisposed to fantasy rather than the harsh reality.” (Wolf, p 29) Archer’s “vision” of the world around him is at odds with “what really is” – which is another important thematic conflict in *The Age of Innocence*, “the difference between ‘visions’ and reality.” (Orlando, p 171) Archer’s vision proves to be faulty. He is, as Orlando points out, “an untrustworthy reader, and by using this male reflector as a device, Wharton carries out her critique of a misguided gaze – an unseeing eye.” (171)

The way Archer functions as “an untrustworthy reader” is best exemplified by the way he interprets or reads Ellen and May. Newland’s interpretations of both women prove to be false interpretations, visions, even illusions. For instance, he associates Ellen with the world of fiction and art, a fantasy world; that is to say, a world that is unreal. However, “May’s world” proves to be equally unreal, even though he associates her more than once with the “the real” and “the truth” – for example, when he sees her in the garden of her parents’ house, he thinks "here was truth, here was reality.” (*The Age of Innocence*, p 140) Fryer points out that it is “May (who) stands for ‘a kind of hieroglyphic world;” (162) therefore, the world he associates with May, the world of “arbitrary signs,” (*The Age of Innocence*, p 42) turns out to be just as elusive and as unreal as the other. A fair point that Fryer makes is that “it seems that it is impossible for Newland to tell what the ‘real thing’ is at all.” (162)

### 3.3. May vs. Ellen: light and dark contrast

#### 3.3.1. May as an image of “whiteness”, “purity” and “innocence”

May, Archer’s fiancée and later wife, is never directly represented in the novel, everything the reader learns of her − her thoughts and emotions − is filtered through Archer’s consciousness, and Archer is unable to fully understand or *see* her. Cain argues that even though the reader perceives the story through Archer’s eyes, May is in actual fact “the book’s centre.” (Cain, p 105) Significantly, the book carries the title from a painting by Sir Joshua Reynolds *The Age of Innocence*. The way Archer interprets May is best illustrated by this painting: it shows “the profile of a small girl seated barefoot in a pastoral setting with bow in hair, eyes open and unquestioning, and hands demurely crossed over her breast.” (Orlando, p 191) Orlando compares this painting to Archer’s vision of May and argues that “the woman, to Archer, is like a child, and her hands are not to be applied to active

endeavors; (…).” (191) In Archer’s eyes May is an “infantilized” woman, (Orlando, p 3) a vision of “abysmal purity.”

Archer associates May with whiteness and childlike innocence. In the opera scene at the beginning of the novel May is described as a young girl all in white with fair braids and an immense bouquet of lilies-of-the-valley on her knee; as Archer watches her, she touches the flowers softly with her “white-gloved finger-tips.” (*The Age of Innocence*, p 4) Archer sees her as a simple, naïve, and honest girl, someone he would instruct in the ways of the world; and who would become “his comrade once freed from her ‘abysmal purity’ by his ‘enlightening companionship.’” (Fryer, p 160) The play May and Newland are watching is Goudon’s *Faust*. As Archer observes May, he is convinced that “the darling (…) doesn’t even guess what it’s all about;” (*The Age of Innocence*, p 4) meaning that he associates May’s “innocence” and “inexperience” with “blindness.” At one point, he even compares her to a “Kentucky cave-fish, which had ceased to develop eyes because they had no use for them;” (*The Age of Innocence,* p 81) and feels the urge “to take the bandage from her eyes, and bid her look forth on the world.” (*The Age of Innocence*, p 80 - 81) As already mentioned Archer’s interpretation of May proves to be false. Orlando points out that there is a huge “difference between what May ‘seemed’ to (Archer) – what Archer ‘understood’ – and the reality of May Welland; Wharton repeatedly (draws) attention to this gap.” (190) As Fryer points out, in May’s “’innocent’ world (there) is a shrewdness, even a worldliness which” (162) Archer doesn’t perceive at all.

Moreover, Archer often thinks of May as being very Diana-like, with her lean, athletic body and her skill at archery. The comparison is mentioned several times throughout the novel: at one point as Archer sees her entering a room, she is described as follows: “(…) in her dress of white and silver, with a wreath of silver blossoms in her hair, the tall girl looked like a Diana just alighting from the chase;” (*The Age of Innocence*, p 62) another time Archer observes that May “might have been chosen to pose for (…) a Greek goddess.” (*The Age of Innocence*, p 189) May’s association with Diana is itself ironic. As Singley points out, the fact that she is associated with Diana “suggests her power over her husband: she is master of the hunt and thus of ‘Archery’. (…) she is a far better equipped ‘Archer’ than Newland ever was.” (172) Unlike Newland “Diana is the ‘archer’ with ‘effectual aim.’ (And May, a winning archeress, ultimately proves her aim to be more effectual than Archer.)” (Orlando, p 190) She is far

better equipped to see through to the reality of things than Archer; and very capable of manipulating situations in such a way as to seem completely “blameless” in the end. The best example of her shrewdness is the way she orchestrates Ellen’s return to Europe: she very tactfully told Ellen of her pregnancy two weeks before she was certain (in order to eliminate her from the equation); and she even, as Singley puts it, “marshaled the forces of his own "hounds" — his (Newland’s) family — to send Ellen (away).” (172)

Wharton shows Archer’s vision of May to be completely false. Convinced as Archer may be of his reading of May − that she is predictable and boring − May proves to be in fact very “artful;” (Orlando, p 191) and her reading of him proves to be far more accurate than his ever was. Furthermore, she is able to live with Archer because, as Cain argues, she is aware that his love for Ellen Olenska is just a fantasy:

> (…) Newland and Ellen have not been lovers, not sexually. But Wharton wants us to see May's toughness: May can live with Newland's infidelity because she knows he does not really love Ellen. She knows the difference between loving someone and imagining the love of someone. If she controls Newland, it is because she knows him better than he knows himself. Having sex with Ellen would have been a fantasy for Newland even if it had actually occurred. (Cain, p 103)

May knows Archer “better than he knows himself;” and is aware that their marriage consisted of “disappointment, incomprehension, and regret.” (Cain, p 104) She even proves to be more mature than him; she is in fact a far better reader than Archer ever was and is able to see through his illusions and fantasies.

### 3.3.2. “The rich and dense world” of Ellen Olenska

Newland perceives Ellen Olenska as the exact opposite of May. While May is at all times dressed in white, Ellen chooses simpler lines and darker colors: “Ellen chooses unadorned dark velvet for the Opera, a fur-trimmed lounging robe at home - clothes which seem exotic in their simplicity, and suited to no other occasion than Ellen's mood, her body.” (Fryer, p 160) As Singley notes, Ellen choice of richer colors gives her an air of the exotic and of scandal, “crimson and amber are the colors Ellen wears at the van der Luyden's party and at her farewell dinner — symbols of passion and decadence by Victorian standards.” (173) Her Opera dress of dark blue velvet exposed “a little more shoulder and bosom than New York was accustomed to seeing” (*The Age of Innocence*, p 12) and her headdress gave her a

"Josephine look." (*The Age of Innocence*, p 7) Newland reads "May Welland and Ellen Olenska as the traditional light and dark ladies of (his) script." (Fryer, p 160) On one hand May seems predictable to Newland, Ellen on the other seems exotic. Significantly, he sends May lilies-of-the-valley, and Ellen yellow roses "too rich, too strong, in their fiery beauty." (The Age of Innocence, p 77)

Ellen has a "rich atmosphere" about her, an atmosphere which "felt (…) too dense and yet too stimulating for (Newland's) lungs." (*The Age of Innocence*, p 362) As Fryer puts it, "Ellen suggests 'tragic and moving possibilities outside the daily run of experience.'" (160) The way she dresses, her informality, her education and her way of life all carry the air of decadence, the unusual and the exotic. The part of town she chooses to live in also sets her apart from the everyday crowd Newland is used to. Unlike the fashionable part of town, where Newlands, Archers etc. live, Ellen chooses to reside in the part of town where writers and artists live. In other words, Ellen enjoys a more bohemian lifestyle. The atmosphere in her house seems completely foreign to Archer; he associates her with "individual freedom and experience", with variety and "cultural and sexual richness." (Fryer, p 161)

Moreover, being in Ellen's presence makes Newland view his native city differently "as through the wrong end of a telescope;" and viewed as such "it looked disconcertingly small and distant."(*The Age of Innocence*, p 74) As Singley points out, at that moment, May also starts shrinking in his eyes until she becomes a "faint white figure", (*The Age of Innocence*, p 76) whereas Ellen "looms larger in (his) vision."(Singley, p 177) In Newland's eyes May is stuck in a small world; whereas Ellen's world holds a promise of passion and freedom.

The world Archer associates with Ellen has an air and "quality of unreality for (him);" (Fryer, p 163) it is the world belonging "to fiction and the stage." (*The Age of Innocence*, p 107) For instance, the scene in Newport when Archer observes Ellen from a distance shows to what extent he identifies Ellen with the characters from the books he is reading. In the scene Archer is watching Ellen who has her back turned to him; and he envisions a romantic scene from Boucicault's *The Shaughraun* styling himself and Ellen as the main characters. As already mentioned Archer is a man "engrossed in his fictions;" (Orlando, p 191) he constantly interprets the world around him through the lens of the books he has read and works of art he loves. The works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, in particular *The House of Life,*

make a great impact on him. When reading his works, Archer links Ellen to a "vision of (the) woman" in the sonnet: "All through the night he pursued through those enchanted pages the vision of a woman who had the face of Ellen Olenska." (*The Age of Innocence*, p 138)

In Archer's eyes Ellen is "a vision." (Orlando, p 177) For instance, when he sees her entering a room "everything about her shimmered and glimmered softly, as if her dress had been woven out of candle-beams." (*The Age of Innocence*, p 163) There is however a difference between Archer's vision of Ellen and Ellen herself. As Orlando points out "Wharton accentuates (that there is) a gap between Olenska as woman and Olenska as imaged woman." (178) The Ellen that Archer chases is for the most part a creature of his own imagination; and "because he reads Ellen as this 'vision,' she therefore can never be for him a reality." (Orlando, p 177)

Apart from literature, Ellen is also linked to particular paintings which Archer values. In Archer's eyes Ellen is "rendered as a work of art." (Orlando, p 178) The most prominent ekphrasis in connection to Ellen is, as Orlando notes, when Archer compares her to a painting by Carolus-Duran. When Archer comes to visit Ellen in her apartment, she is dressed in "a long robe of red velvet bordered about the chin and down the front with glossy black fur;" (*The Age of Innocence*, p 103) and he immediately makes a connection to *La Dame au Gant* by Emile-Auguste Carolus-Duran. Words like "perverse" and "provocative" (*The Age of Innocence*, p 104) come to Archer's mind when he's looking at Ellen. Orlando argues that Archer further associates Ellen with the woman in the painting as he watches her holding gloves and a fan "as if watching to see if he had the power to make her drop them." (*The Age of Innocence*, p 168) The lady in the painting by Duran has dropped a glove. He very much wants to "align Ellen with the woman in the painting because he wants her to be most fully what she always has represented for him." (Orlando, p 179) All this serves to emphasize that Newland Archer is someone who models "life on the experience of art." (Orlando, 179)

As the novel progresses, Archer's idea of Ellen becomes more and more intertwined with fantasy – this is also due to the fact that their romance was never actually realized. Eventually she becomes, as Wolf notes, "no more than a treasured memory," (Wolf, p 29) a missed opportunity; and therefore, evermore unreal and abstract. He himself remarks that when he thought of her "it was abstractly, serenely, as one might think of some imaginary

beloved in a book or a picture: she had become the composite vision of all that he had missed." (*The Age of Innocence*, p 350) At the very end when he goes to meet Ellen with his son, he refuses to see her in person and chooses to remain outside on the street because as he says "'It's more real to me here than if I went up.'" (*The Age of Innocence*, p 364) He chooses not to see Ellen because his own picture of her is more real to him; and seeing her might tear that picture to shreds. As Orlando puts it, he preferred instead "to protect his picture of her." (194)

As already mentioned, the actual Ellen Olenska is at odds with the "vision of a woman" (*The Age of Innocence*, p 138) Newland has created. He sees her, more often than not, as someone helpless in need of his protection. Orlando points out that he is convinced "that Olenska is a 'damsel in distress.'" (187) In his eyes, she is "an exposed and pitiful figure (…) to be saved at all costs from farther wounding herself in her mad plunges against fate." (*The Age of Innocence,* p 94) Ellen, however, as Orlando and Singley both stress, is a very independent figure. Singley calls her "Wharton's most courageous and independent heroine;" (166) and emphasizes her "commitment to her own path (which) suggests a self-conscious philosophy." (167) The literature which Ellen reads differs greatly from Newland's. Kress Karn points out that she reads naturalist and realist authors, "not romances; and (…) she possesses what Wharton calls elsewhere the 'seeing eye.' (…) she resists (Newland's) romanticizing impulse in order to face, as she poignantly calls them, 'realities.'" (143) In truth, Newland and "the actual" Ellen have very little in common; the greatest difference between the two of them has to do with Wharton's idea of the "seeing eye" that Kress Karn refers to. Ellen looks "not at visions, but at realities." (*The Age of Innocence*, p 292) For example, in the earlier mentioned Newport scene, when Newland observed Ellen convinced she isn't aware of his presence, she later explains that she "didn't look around on purpose" (*The Age of Innocence*, p 236) because she knew he was there. Ellen is a far more "deft reader (since) she has—without his knowing—read him." (Orlando, p 188)

Unlike Ellen, who is a deft reader and looks "not at visions, but at realities;" (*The Age of Innocence*, p 292) Newland Archer, ironically, turns out to be the "Archer" with "ineffectual aim." (*The Age of Innocence*, p 225) Orlando compares Archer to a small statue in a Newport summerhouse – a Cupid with no bow or arrow: "Wharton's 'Archer' is much like the 'wooden Cupid' atop the Newport summerhouse 'who had lost his bow and arrow but

continued to take ineffectual aim'." (173) Archer constantly misreads and misinterprets both Ellen and May, even though both of them "collapse (his) reading" (Orlando, p 192) and visions of them. They also "read him more accurately than he reads himself." (Orlando, p 174) More importantly even though Newland interprets May and Ellen as opposites, they prove to be not so different from one another in the end, as Fryer points out. They are both "chips of the old block." Grandmother Mingott, Catherine the Great, the very centre of the "tribal community" of old New York, herself comments "that Ellen is the only one of the family like her." (Fryer, p 159)

### 3.4. Newland Archer: "The Portrait of a Gentleman"

Newland Archer is on one hand a victim of his own "misguided reading." (Orlando, p 25) On the other he is also a "victim of society's well-mannered brutalities." (Wolf qtd. in Orlando, p 173) As Fryer points out, "to read 'The Age of Innocence' as a failed love story is to believe that (…) the script offers Newland Archer a choice between May Welland and Ellen Olenska, a Faust-like opportunity to transform his reality." (162) However, this freedom of choice is in itself also an illusion; Archer "is fated to remain in the old pattern," (Fryer, p 162) because there is nothing "innocent" about the world he lives in.

At one point in the novel Archer's friend, Ned Winsett, who "sees (Archer's) limitations" (Fryer, p 161) comments that Archer reminds him of "the pictures on the walls of a deserted house (…)" and compares Archer to an imaginary picture, "The Portrait of a Gentleman;" (*The Age of Innocence*, p 124) – another very poignant ekphrasis in *The Age of Innocence*. Kozloff argues that Newland Archer as a "Portrait of a Gentleman" and his name "echo (…) Henry James's Isabel Archer in *Portrait of a Lady*." (272) She argues that, similarly to James' novel, Wharton makes a comparison between the American and European society: the American society is on the one hand associated with "innocence," "purity," "youth," the European with "experience," "age," and "sexuality" (272) – this contrast echoes Newland's view of the contrast between May and Ellen. However, Wharton also ascribes, as Kozloff points out, some very negative connotations to the American society, such as "frigidity," "constraint" and "hypocrisy." (272)

> One of the pivotal issues of Wharton's *Age of Innocence* is where to slot "morality." Wharton's Old New York believes itself to be the epitome of rectitude, and holds up for admiration its rigidities about

> form, family, and financial probity and its hyper-vigilance about female chastity. Wharton deliberately shows readers, however, that this society is self-deluded and deeply hypocritical. (Kozloff, 272 – 273)

The tribal society of old New York makes sure that Archer remains with May and that Ellen leaves New York for good. Ellen's farewell dinner is described as a "tribal rally around a kinswoman about to be eliminated from the tribe." (*The Age of Innocence*, p 337) Archer is completely taken aback by this development; he feels as if he were floating "somewhere between chandelier and ceiling" (*The Age of Innocence*, p 338) and gazes around, as Singley puts it, with "unseeing eyes"(178). He fails to comprehend "how all of this has come about: the menu and the guest list and the flowers have been chosen by May, her mother and her mother-in-law." (Fryer, p 165) The society that he felt vastly superior to has managed to read him very deftly and accurately. The whole "tribe" has consequently ensured that he remain closed in the "family vault." (*The Age of Innocence*, p 339)

Archer is trapped; on the one hand due to "his limitations and the limits of his perception" (Fryer, p 161) and the "forces he does not understand" (Fryer, p 161) on the other, namely, the brutality of the very "exclusive and (highly) ritualized" (Singley, p 166) society of old New York. He and Ellen are the "the individual(s) (who are) sacrificed to what is supposed to be the collective interest." (*The Age of Innocence*, p 110) He is trapped in the family vault, just like in a painting – he also ends up "gruesomely preserved in the airless atmosphere of a perfectly irreproachable existence." (*The Age of Innocence,* p 50)

## 4. Visual figures in *Ethan Frome*

### 4.1. The New England countryside in *Ethan Frome*

Unlike *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence* that describe the high society of New York (the turn-of-the-century society and the old New York society) *Ethan Frome* depicts a different society, that of the New England countryside. The setting for *Ethan Frome* is the "wintry, rural New England." (Ammons, p 9) Wharton's choice of setting was, as W.B. Lewis argues, an "attempt at 'recreating the spell that the New England landscape had laid upon her, its dark somber beauty, its atmosphere (for her) of the haunted and tragic'." (W. B. Lewis qtd. in Fisher Dodson p 13) The characters from *Ethan Frome*, the inhabitants of the "haunted and tragic" rural New England are, as Wharton herself calls them, her "'granite

outcroppings; but half-emerged from the soil, and scarcely more articulate;'" (Wharton qtd. by Murad, p 91) her depiction of that community and her "description of nature" is done, as Singley points out "in a modernist way." (115) Modernist writers "often achieved a hard-edged quality with images of metals, especially steel;" (Singley, p 125) the same goal that Wharton achieves "with New England granite." (125)

In contrast to the two previous novels the visual figures in *Ethan Frome* revolve (for the most part, but not exclusively) around nature. Bernard stresses the importance of the "compatibility of setting and character" (179) in *Ethan Frome*; which is most apparent in the relation between the Starkfield landscape and its inhabitants, particularly Ethan, the main protagonist. Nature in *Ethan Frome* is cruel, merciless and smothering. The village of Starkfield, the setting where the story takes place, is always seen in winter – both in the story that functions as a frame and the story of Ethan's youth. As Ammons points out, "winter dominates the story: snow is everywhere, frigid, cold, (and) lifeless." (9)

Starkfield is a village that lies "(…) under two feet of snow, with drifts at the windy corners. (Where) in a sky of iron the points of the Dipper hung like icicles and Orion flashed his cold fires." (*Ethan Frome*, p 24) It is a place of "crystal clearness" and "sunless cold." (*Ethan Frome*, p 7) Winter is compared to a cavalry that lays siege on the village, and Starkfield is a "starved garrison" that surrenders and capitulates "without quarter." (*Ethan Frome*, p 8) It is a place where "clumps of trees in the snow seemed to draw together in ruffled lumps, like birds with their heads under their wings;"(*Ethan Frome*, p 141) where "hemlock boughs (are) bent inward to their trunks by the weight of the snow;" (*Ethan Frome*, p 17) and where "an orchard of starved apple-trees (is) writhing over a hillside among outcroppings of slate that nuzzled up through the snow like animals pushing out their noses to breathe." (*Ethan Frome*, p 18) The farm-houses are "mute and cold as a grave-stone," (*Ethan Frome*, p 45) that only "make the landscape lonelier." (*Ethan Frome*, p 18) Nature in *Ethan Frome* is life-threatening and uninviting. As Dodson puts it, nature acts "as a malevolent force (that would) crush the spirit;" (13) nature is presented as "hostile and entrapping (and) offers no escape." (Singley, p 109)

The winter "brutally imprisons its inhabitants." (Fisher Dodson, p 13) The narrator, a nameless engineer that visits Starkfield is "struck by the contrast between the vitality of the

climate and the deadness of the community." (*Ethan Frome*, p 7) The inhabitants of this frozen world are entrapped, isolated, and deformed just like the trees that are bent under the weight of the snow; they are left without hope of any kind of fulfillment, emotional or otherwise. In other words, the wintry, frozen landscape and the "repressive climate parallels the repressed citizens." (Fisher Dodson, p 13) Ethan himself is described as being "a part of the mute melancholy landscape, an incarnation of its frozen woe, with all that was warm and sentient in him fast bound below the surface (…)." (*Ethan Frome*, p 13) Wolf argues that the weather functions as a "mirror to Ethan's soul;" (Wolf qtd. in Fisher Dodson, p 13) the world outside reflects Ethan's inner world; it is an illustration of his hopelessness, melancholy and isolation. Ethan lives in a world of living death. Wolf again appropriately describes Ethan's farm: "The Frome farm in Starkfield is some ghastly land of the living dead – without a future, without hope, without pleasure of any sort." (236)

The imagery and symbolism of the graves in Starkfield also serves to emphasize that fact. The impression that Ethan gets when looking at the graves is that there is no escape; the message the graves impart is: "We never got away – how should you?" (*Ethan Frome*, p 46) Mrs. Hale, one of the Starkfield inhabitants, comments: "I don't see's there much difference between the Fromes up at the farm and the Fromes down in the graveyard (…)." (*Ethan Frome*, p 163) Just as Wharton describes all characters connected to New England as "half-emerged from the soil," (qtd. in Murad, p 91) Singley emphasizes the Fromes as "barely distinguishable from the gravestones themselves," (114) empty shells with no life or warmth left in them.

### 4.2. The narrator's "vision" of the story

In contrast to the focalizing consciousnesses in *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence* the focalizing consciousness in *Ethan Frome* is vastly more complex. In the first part of the story, which functions as a frame, Ethan is presented indirectly through the eyes of a stranger. The whole story in fact is told from the point of view of a nameless engineer who visits Starkfield. This outsider than reconstructs the story of Ethan's youth. Wolf argues that Wharton's use of this narrator has a specific function: it prevents from Ethan's tragedy being interpreted as "the universal condition of mankind." (236) Wolf searches for the reasons

which led to Ethan's tragedy, the answer to which she finds in the dangerous "fascination (both Ethan's and the narrator's) with the visionary world." (28)

The nameless engineer reconstructs the story from fragments and bits and pieces of information he has gathered from the Starkfield inhabitants. Each of the informants contributes to the story, as Wharton herself explains, only as much "as he or she is capable of understanding of what to them is a complicated and mysterious case; and only the narrator (…) has scope enough to *see* it all." (qtd. in Murad, p 91) The engineer serves as "a receiver of details from these few Starkfield inhabitants. He then *molds these views* into an *interpretation* of Ethan's story." (Murad, p 93, emphasis mine) In order to piece it all together, the fragments given to him by the villagers prove to be insufficient. The narrator himself comments that "there were perceptible gaps between (Herman Gow's) facts, and I had the sense that *the deeper meaning of the story was in the gaps*." (*Ethan Frome*, p 6 emphasis mine) The narrator himself fills in these gaps "(…) as imaginatively as he can. His vision, or descriptive power, picks up where conversation leaves off (…)." (Miller, p 15) To complete the story, to make it whole, the narrator relies greatly on what he sees, on his vision. What he sees and encounters on Ethan's farm helps him complete the story. As the narrator enters Ethan's farm, he comments that he has "found the clue to Ethan Frome, and began to put together this *vision of his story*." (*Ethan Frome*, p 23, emphasis mine) The last missing piece the narrator needs to complete his vision, the last clue is that which he sees there.

In the second part of the novel, the story is no longer told in first person narration; a third-person omniscient narrator enters Ethan's mind and expresses his thoughts and ideas "with more sophistication than Ethan could possibly be capable of, and reveals acts and ideas of Ethan's that no one in Starkfield could have known (…)." (Murad, p 94) This is what makes Ethan Frome as a focalizing consciousness infinitely complex; the inner story, Ethan's story is construed by the narrator; it is a product of the narrator's imagination, his "vision." (Wolf, p 27) Whereas, Ethan himself, *his* thoughts, *his* emotions and *his* story remain elusive; the way in which his mind works, his manner of contemplating his own fate is obscured by the narrator's vision. Wolf also stresses that the narrator's story is in itself a "fictional world," (27) a creation:

> (…) the narrator *conjures up* an explanation for the tragedy whose results alone are genuinely *visible* to him. This *fantasy* (that is, the 'story' of the young Ethan Frome) encompasses most of the book. (…) Ethan Frome's story as it is construed by the narrator is not intended to be taken as literal 'truth'; rather, it is the *product of the narrator's own imagination, his vision*. (Wolf, p 27, emphasis mine)

## 4.3. Images of "broken people" and "broken dreams and illusions" in *Ethan Frome*

### 4.3.1. Ethan – "a ruin of a man"

Upon arriving in Starkfield, the narrator is struck by the very sight of Ethan: "(…) he was the most striking figure in Starkfield, though he was but the ruin of a man."(*Ethan Frome*, p 3) Ethan's "striking figure," "powerful look," and height serve to describe him, as Bernard notes, as a "heroic figure;" (181) the narrator himself remarks that Ethan looked "like the bronze image of a hero;" (*Ethan Frome*, p 13) and imagines "how gallantly his lean brown head, with its shock of light hair, must have sat on his strong shoulders (…)." (*Ethan Frome*, p 5) In spite of his heroic figure, Ethan carries about him "the profound accumulated cold of many Starkfield winters;" (*Ethan Frome*, p 13) meaning that just as the landscape is deformed and bent out of shape, Ethan is a "ruin of a man (…) bleak and unapproachable." (*Ethan Frome*, p 4) The description of the landscape parallels Ethan's description. In a way, as Bernard notes, "the entire landscape (serves) to describe him (Ethan) effectively; his agony is as broad and deep as that of the winter scene." (181) Ethan is described as being caught, imprisoned, just as the landscape is frozen; his lameness checks his steps "like a jerk of a chain." (*Ethan Frome*, p 4) Bernard notes that "(he) is cut off (…) from his former strength, trapped in his crippled frame." (180) As already mentioned, the Starkfield winter scene also reflects Ethan's inner self; everything that was once "warm and sentient" is now frozen and "too remote for casual access." (*Ethan Frome,* p 13) The description of Ethan's farm also serves to emphasize this point; it symbolizes his emotional starvation.

> I saw then that the unusually *forlorn and stunted look* of the house was partly due to the loss of what is known in New England as the "L": that long deep-roofed adjunct usually built at right angles to the main house, and connecting it, by way of storerooms and tool-house, with the wood-shed and cow-barn. Whether because of its symbolic sense, *the image it presents of a life linked with the soil*, and *enclosing in itself the chief sources of warmth and nourishment*, (…), it is certain *that the "L" rather than the house itself seems to be the centre*, the *actual hearthstone* of the New England farm. Perhaps this connection of ideas, (…), caused me to hear a wistful note in Frome's words, and *to see in the diminished dwelling the image of his own shrunken body*. (*Ethan Frome*, p 19, emphasis mine)

The state the farm is in reflects Ethan's own current state; he is cut off from the soil, from nourishment and warmth; as Fisher Dodson notes, "the 'L' serves the double purpose of protecting the farmer from the outside climate and connecting him to the animals, an essential part of his livelihood. Ethan is cut off from both; alienated from himself." (13)

Another important characteristic of Ethan's is his "visual keenness." (Miller, p 15) When the narrator meets Ethan for the first time, he stresses his heroic figure and his ruined and disfigured current state. However, when he tells his version of the story of Ethan's past, he takes special care to emphasize Ethan's "visual keenness," or "visual sensibility" as Miller calls it: "Both the narrator and Ethan have a 'tendency toward visual sensibility.'" (15) In the inner tale Ethan is described as being "(…) more sensitive than the people about him to the appeal of natural beauty. (…) even in his unhappiest moments field and sky spoke to him with a deep and powerful persuasion." (*Ethan Frome*, p 30) Being "more sensitive" than the people around him Ethan sees beauty others cannot. Ethan's visual sensibility makes him susceptible to beauty, particularly the beauty of nature; he feels "a shock of silent joy" (*Ethan Frome,* p 31) when looking at "the cold red of sunset behind winter hills, the flight of cloud-flocks over slopes of golden stubble, or the intensely blue shadows of hemlocks on sunlit snow." (*Ethan Frome*, p 31)

Closely related to Ethan's "visual sensibility" is the "visionary element" (Wolf, p 28) in *Ethan Frome*. Wolf stresses that Ethan "has been thoroughly possessed by this visionary element (…);" (28) which she characterizes as a "dangerous force;" (28) since it is "a force that calls one to passivity, to dreams (…)." (28) Ethan is a dreamer; he is in a way spellbound by the "visionary element" and has chosen the "satisfactions of daydreaming and illusion over the imperfect, but real and recognizable, happiness of genuine life. Frome has pursued his fantasies to the exclusion of everything else (…)." (Wolf, p 28) Being very sensitive Ethan is prone to daydreams and fantasies. Throughout the tale he often gets lost in dreams and visions; he is, so to speak, seduced by vision, and ultimately chooses fantasy over real life. Similarly, to Newland Archer, but to a much greater extent, Ethan Frome is fascinated by the visual and the illusionary; he renounces reality in exchange for fantasy.

It is important to note that although "the narrator endows Ethan with superb vision, (he also assigns to him) deficient verbal skills (…)." (Miller, p 17) Being inarticulate is another

important part of Ethan's character; he is unable to adequately put into words all the impressions and sensations he feels, or to express his feelings and wishes. Bernard also comments on Ethan's inarticulateness: "Not only are his feelings locked, frozen; his very speech is also, (…). Neither he nor the landscape can express its warm and tender part." (179) Ethan's inability to communicate is partly the reason for his tragedy. As Fisher Dodson argues, "Ethan's inability to leave the wicked Zeena and start life over with Mattie (is) a tragic mistake, (…) related to his inability to communicate." (15) Ethan's wishes and dreams remain all locked up inside him; since he is unable to express his wishes and longings, they can never be realized. Zeena, his wife, on the other hand is quite manipulative. "What Zeena says goes;" (Bernard, p 181) and Ethan is unable to break free of her. It is safe to say that Ethan's character, which is flawed, is one of the reasons things turn out the way they do; Ethan is unable "to break out of the caged life he creates for himself (…) even if the bars are reinforced by people and forces meaner and greater than himself." (Fisher Dodson 15)

### 4.3.2. Mattie as "the promise of spring"

The character of Mattie Silver is associated with warmth and light. Her coming to the Frome household is compared to "the lighting of a fire on a cold hearth;" (*Ethan Frome*, p 30) in Ethan's eyes her face "looked like a window that has caught the sunset;" (*Ethan Frome*, p 32) and her laughter sounded like a "call of a bird." (*Ethan Frome,* p 126) Images of spring, of ice and snow thawing and melting are always connected to Mattie. To Ethan Mattie is like a promise of spring; she incites laughter in him for instance, laughter which "ran (…) like spring rills in a thaw;" (*Ethan Frome*, p 41) and her cry, when she expresses her disappointment at the possibility of being dismissed from the household, seemed to make "the iron heavens (…) melt and rain down sweetness." (*Ethan Frome* EF, p 44-45) When in Mattie's company Ethan feels "as if they were floating on a summer stream." (*Ethan Frome*, p 47) As Bernard notes, "Mattie, (…), has the effect of loosening the rigid physical and emotional landscape." (179) Just as she is associated with spring melting away the snow, she thaws and loosens the "rigid physical and emotional landscape" of Ethan's soul.

It is, however, important to note that all these images associated with Mattie are the way she appears to Ethan; namely, as "the embodiment of sexual promise." (Wolf, p 239) She incites warm feelings in Ethan, he associates her with spring, summer and light. She is also

quite often associated with the color red. She wears a "cherry-coloured scarf" (*Ethan Frome*, 27) at one point; and later on, she is described as having "a streak of crimson" (*Ethan Frome*, p 74) ribbons in her hair. Red being associated with her clearly has sexual connotations. Mattie, or the idea of Mattie, as "the embodiment of sexual promise," (Wolf, p 239) is for the most part just the way Ethan sees her. As Wolf puts it, this idea of Mattie is largely "a figment of Ethan Frome's imagination." (239)

### 4.3.3. Zeena as "a mysterious alien presence, an evil energy"

Unlike the character of Mattie, who is associated with warmth and light, the character of Zeena, Ethan's wife, is associated with darkness and death. Mattie and Zeena function as opposites in the novel; a kind of "light and dark" contrast. (Bernard, p 179)

At the beginning of the novel Zeena is portrayed as a sickly invalid, a self-absorbed hypochondriac. In contrast to Mattie, who is portrayed as a "bright and cheerful young woman so remarkably full of life;" (Fisher Dodson, p 15) Zeena is associated with darkness, coldness, disease and death. Ammons points to the "iconography of death" (26) surrounding Zeena; she always "appears surrounded by signs of death and dying." (Ammons, p 23) She is described as very "tall and angular," (*Ethan Frome*, p 48) she has false teeth, and "a high – boned face" (*Ethan Frome*, p 34) that looks "drawn and bloodless"(*Ethan Frome*, 58), full of "querulous lines from her thin nose to the corners of her mouth;"(*Ethan Frome*, 59) her complexion is described as having a "a grayish tinge;" (*Ethan Frome*, p 34) and she is constantly "(involved) with disease." (Ammons, p 26) Although she was not that much older than Ethan – she is seven years his senior – at thirty-five "she was already an old woman." (*Ethan Frome*, p 59) At the point in the story when Ethan approaches his house and sees "a dead cucumber vine" (*Ethan Frome*, p 47) hanging from the porch, a vine that looks "like the crape streamer tied to the door for a death" (*Ethan Frome*, p 47) he immediately associates this image with Zeena; "and the thought flashed through Ethan's brain: 'If it was there for Zeena '(…)." (*Ethan Frome*, p 47)

However, the character of Zeena changes drastically as the novel progresses. It turns out that she is by no means weak or as sickly as she at first seems to be. She transforms from a "listless creature who had lived at (Ethan's) side in a state of sullen self-absorption," (*Ethan Frome*, 106) to "an ironic inversion of the nurturing mother (…)." (Singley, p 121) Ethan

marries Zeena, who nursed his sick mother, right after the mother dies; and so, as Singley points out, Zeena "takes the *dead* mother's place (…); (she takes on) the parental role of Ethan's mother, (…) and Ethan and Mattie, in contrast, are portrayed as helpless children." (Singley, p 120 emphasis mine) Zeena's sickness – she claims she had lost her health while nursing Ethan's mother – proves to be an illusion; it is something she herself cultivates and uses to manipulate and control Ethan. To Ethan she comes to personify all the misfortune in his life: "All the long misery of his baffled past, of his youth of failure, hardship and vain effort, rose up in his soul in bitterness and seemed to take shape before him in the woman who at every turn had barred his way." (*Ethan Frome*, p 107)

Ethan feels a sense of helplessness and "vague dread" (*Ethan Frome*, p 55) in Zeena's presence. She proves to be "a mysterious alien presence, an evil energy." (*Ethan Frome*, p 107) Singley argues that Zeena is "invested with enigmatic and absolute powers;" (107) and by assigning these attributes to Zeena "Wharton extends her (Zeena's) role from spouse to parent to deity." (121) Zeena transforms from a sickly creature to a cruel and manipulative mother; and eventually – after the incident with the broken pickle dish - to a vengeful god. Even Ethan and Mattie's attempted suicide seems to be "under Zeena's God-like control." (Singley, p 121) Ethan and Mattie hope to commit suicide by crashing into an elm tree; but just before the sled reaches the tree, an image of Zeena's face flashes in Ethan's mind, a face "with twisted monstrous lineaments, thrust itself between him and his goal;" (*Ethan Frome*, p 153) and he suddenly changes course. They both survive the crash, but Ethan is crippled by it and Mattie becomes an invalid. It was "Zeena's image, like that of a wrathful God, (that caused) the sled to veer from its course, and the lovers' hopes — and bodies - are dashed." (Singley, p 121) In the end Zeena is the one who triumphs; she is the one who is full of vitality – thus proving that her sickness was an illusion – and the one who nurses Ethan and Mattie back to health and later takes care of Mattie. "She thrives when caring for the crippled and expiring." (Ammons, p 23) In the end, Zeena is the vital one and Mattie the invalid.

In the end Zeena and Mattie, who seemed so different from one another – Mattie is presented as bright, happy, and lively; and Zeena as decrepit, cold and wicked – no longer appear as dissimilar. Ammons argues that the female characters in *Ethan Frome* all end up turning into witches: "'Woman will turn into a Witch.' (…) (Ethan's) mother, then his wife,

Zeena, and finally his young love Mattie, do exactly that." (qtd. in Murad, p 90) As already mentioned, Zeena takes the place of Ethan's mother, who was sick and dying, and whose illness prevented Ethan from finishing his education; Zeena then takes her place, becomes the sickly invalid, who bars Ethan's way at every turn; and eventually that very same place is taken up by Mattie, who becomes an invalid after the crash. Wolf also comments that "Frome has perceived the two women in his life as essentially different from each other; his tragic insight comes when he is forced to recognize that each would play the same complimentary role (…)." (241) In the end Mattie is no longer associated with bright colors, spring or summer; she is no longer "the embodiment of sexual promise." (Wolf, p 239) In the end she is associated with dark colors, sickness and death just as Zeena was and Ethan's mother before that.

### 4.3.4. The imagery and symbolism of the red pickle dish

"The sexual symbolism" (Bernard, 179), very noticeable in connection to Mattie (the color red and images of spring) and Zeena (coldness, illness, in short, a negation thereof), becomes very apparent in the scene with the red pickle dish, one of the crucial scenes in the story. The dish, not accidentally red in color, is Zeena's most valued possession, a wedding gift that she keeps hidden away. Fisher Dodson argues that the pickle dish functions as "a symbol of Zeena's inability to live life, her prized possession sits in a closet, away from anyone's view and performs neither a utilitarian nor an aesthetic function." (13) Zeena never uses the pickle dish. Its function is a ceremonial one at best, definitely not a practical one – which very much reflects Zeena and Ethan's marriage. "The sexual connotations here are obvious. The fact that the wedding dish, which was meant to contain pickles, in fact never does, explains a lot of the heaviness of atmosphere, the chill, the frigidity." (Bernard, 183) One night when Zeena is away, Mattie and Ethan spend a night alone and use the pickle dish – they "express and explore their desire." (Singley, p 120) In Ethan's mind the evening turns into one of his fantasies of their imaginary life together. However, Zeena's cat, which functions as her "occult emissary" (Singley, p 120), shatters the dish. Later when Zeena realizes the dish is broken, she carries it out of the room "as if she carried a dead body." (*Ethan Frome*, p 115) The shattered dish may therefore be interpreted as Zeena and Ethan's marriage being broken. Still, the fact that it was the cat (Zeena) that broke it signifies that Zeena is in fact responsible for the failure of her marriage:

> The scene (of Zeena carrying the dish) is a symbolic recognition of the fact that Mattie has usurped (Zeena's) place, broken her marriage, and become one with Ethan, though in fact it was the cat (Zeena) who actually broke the dish. The fact that Zeena never truly filled her place, acted the role of wife, and is herself responsible for the failure of the marriage does not bother her. (Bernard, 183)

The broken dish may also symbolize Mattie and Ethan's broken dream which is destroyed by Zeena; as Ammons notes "because of Zeena, Ethan will never be able to marry and father children with Mattie. He will never hold the child he imagines and longs for, (…)." (27) The broken dish, therefore, as Ammons puts it "predicts the broken bodies and lost fertility of Ethan and Mattie." (27) Very shortly thereafter their bodies will be left as broken as their dreams and they will remain as barren and infertile as the countryside. As Bernard puts it, "Frome's sexuality is dead. (…) (He) has shed his manhood. (He) never overcomes the ice of accumulated Starkfield winters. His final solution is to merge himself with winter forever." (184) Ethan has merged with winter, given up all hope of spring, and quietly endures the harsh conditions.

## 5. Conclusion

The visual plays an important part in Wharton's fiction. She makes use of visual figures in order to express her views on art, her skepticism toward modernity and progress, and her unsentimental view of the past.

The main characters in all three novels possess a certain "tendency toward visual sensibility," (Miller, p 15) and an "artistic temperament." (Miller, p 18) Their "visual sensibility" is very influential in the way they view themselves, each other and the world around them − often through the lens of visual arts, but also nature, technology etc. Moreover, Wharton continually draws attention to the discrepancy between their vision of the world and the reality around them.

The scope of visual figures used in the three novels range from high art, technology, transportation, nature, even waste. In all three novels Wharton expresses her skepticism towards modernity and progress on the one hand, and her ambivalence toward the past. As Fryer points out, Wharton "saw the repression of the self in the old ways and fragmentation of the self in the new ways." (157)

## 6. Abstract

Vision and the visual play an important role in Edith Wharton's works. Wharton uses a wide scope of visual figures – ranging from high art, technology, transportation, nature, even waste – in order to express her views on art, her skepticism toward modernity and progress, and her unsentimental view of the past. Wharton uses ekphrasis in The House of Mirth to express her views on art and whether art should be treated as a material object. Moreover, her choice of visual figures shows "how much Wharton was negotiating modernity in her writing." (Hoeller, p 137) Images of transportation, technology and rubbish found in The House of Mirth have very negative connotations – something that betrays her skepticism towards the idea of progress. Moreover, the style used in Ethan Frome is modernist. The same way modernist writers "(…) achieved a hard-edged quality with images of metals, especially steel," (Singley, p 125) Wharton does "with New England granite." (125) Moreover, Wharton's skepticism towards progress is by no means a sign of her favoring the past. Her ambivalence toward the past is apparent in her use of tribal imagery, and imagery of tombs, doomed cities and pyramids in The Age of Innocence; the society of old New York is portrayed as oppressive and suffocating.

The main characters in all three novels possess a certain "tendency toward visual sensibility," (Miller, p 15) and an "artistic temperament." (Miller, p 18) Their "visual sensibility" is very influential in the way they view themselves, each other and the world around them – often through the lens of visual arts, but also nature, technology etc. Moreover, Wharton continually draws attention to the discrepancy between their vision of the world and the reality around them. Therefore, vision and the visual are of great importance when analyzing the focalizing consciousnesses in Edith Wharton's fiction.

**Key words**: vision, visual sensibility, visual arts, ekphrasis, symbolism, imagery

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